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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed audio recordings of authentic business negotiations carried out by native speakers of English in British companies. Analysis focuses on the roles of buyer and seller, with special emphasis on the inherent power differential caused by the reality of the business transaction and the pragmatics of the business relationship. In these, a key feature is dynamism, which allows for developments in the business relationship. It is suggested that power relationships are reflected in the way the negotiators organize their discourse around topics. Consequently, a topic-oriented, cycle-based model is used to describe these power relationships and subtle power shifts. Topic initiation, development, and endings are examined from the perspective of power implications. In this process, the notion of tactical deference is introduced as a useful tool for description of a seemingly deliberate use by the less powerful speaker of less powerful or "weak" strategies for the sake of eventually achieving a shift in power. Some teaching applications are suggested for training non-native speakers, particularly business executives and sales staff, in English negotiating skills. Contains 16 references. (Author/MSE)

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Discourse Organization and Power: Towards a Pragmatics of Sales Negotiations

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The article examines audio recordings of authentic business negotiations carried out by native speakers of English in U.K. companies. It focuses on the roles of Buyer and Seller, with special emphasis on the inbuilt power differential caused by the reality of the business transaction and the pragmatics of the business relationship. In these, a key feature is dynamism, which allows and makes space for developments in the business relationship. It is suggested that power relationships are reflected in the way the negotiators organize their discourse around topics. Consequently, a topic-oriented, cycle-based, model is used to describe these power relationships and subtle shifts in power. Topic initiation, development, and endings are examined from the point of view of power implications. In this process, the notion of tactical deference is introduce as a useful tool for the description of a seemingly deliberate use, by the less powerful speaker, of less powerful, or "weak" strategies for the sake of eventually achieving a shift in power.

Finally, some teaching applications are suggested for training non-native speakers, business executives and sales staff in particular, in English negotiation skills.

INTRODUCTION

In the title of my paper I link **power** and **organization**-two highly problematic concepts. This linkage demands justification and definition of the concepts. I will therefore start off by briefly exploring both **organization** and **power** as concepts. On the basis of that, I will then argue that, understood against the contextual background of the business roles imposed upon the negotiators by the overall

transactional content, the suggested organization provides a framework for power wielding. Within this framework, the organizational elements can be manipulated by those who are aware of the potential. To illustrate and justify this claim, examples will be given from an analysis of authentic business-to-business sales negotiation data audio-recorded in U.K. companies in 1988.

POWER IN BUSINESS NEGOTIATIONS

Let us start with the basic question: What is 'power' in negotiations? The attempt to answer this question will provide us with a framework within which to consider the following: How is this power then manifested in the way negotiation discourse is organized?

Power in a negotiation depends upon assumptions made by the negotiators about each other, and about the nature and stage of their overall business relationship. Research dealing with power usually sees it as a relatively static phenomenon (see e.g., Miller 1976; Rich 1976). Polarization of power is also often assumed. In the vein of a zero-sum game tradition, interaction is then assumed to contain a finite amount of power so that if one interactant loses power, the other is bound to gain it; witness descriptions in value-laden terms like winners and losers, dominant and subordinated interactants (Lips 1981; Gilligan 1982).

Some researchers, however, point out that power does not necessarily entail domination of others (see e.g., Miller 1976). Lips (1981), for example, links power with more positive concepts, and instead of dominance he speaks of strength. Foucault (1980) joins this more positive way of thinking and points out that power is inherent in all interactive situations and all relationships. According to him, power does not necessarily constitute a limitation of freedom; nor is it necessarily a system of domination exercised by individuals or groups of individuals. Domination is basically a negative concept: in interaction, it represses the freedom of the interactant. Power, on the other hand, may be viewed as the ability to create action, not to suppress it (Foucault 1980). Accordingly, power is the driving force behind interaction and should not be explored in terms of static, value-laden judgements.

Linguistic studies on language and power generally take the power relationship prevailing in the interactive situations studied to be constant; relationships are characterized as 'symmetrical' or 'asymmetrical,'[1] with no suggestion of how the interaction might possibly affect this basic power assumption. Indeed, most studies on the subject focus on situations in which one of the interactants has institutional power vested in him (see e.g., Thomas 1984). By definition, this institutional

power is not negotiable. It is not up for grabs. (No way can a police interview, for example, end up with the suspect, or witness, having more power than the police officer and dominating the interaction; nor can a pupil exchange 'power' roles with his headmaster.)

In her illuminating studies on language and power, Thomas (1985 and 1984) argues a case for 'dynamic pragmatics.' Referring to various studies on politeness, notably Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) and Leech (1983), she points out the role of pragmatic ambivalence in power relationships i.e., leaving the precise illocutionary intent of an utterance diplomatically unclear: If the precise force of a speech act is left unclear, the understanding is that the speaker of the ambiguous utterance gives a free hand to his interactant to interpret the utterance. Conversely, then, the lack of ambiguity, i.e., the explicit signalling of the illocutionary intent of the utterance restricts the freedom of the interactant to interpret the illocutionary force of the utterance (e.g.,'... well there you are Barry I've spelt it out to you. I've left you in no doubt at all how you stand ...' Inspector to police constable, Thomas 1984).

Similarly, Fairclough (1989) looks at the impact of directness in discourse in his data on conversations between a doctor and a group of medical students. He refers to lack of indirectness as 'cornering,' and takes it to be characteristic of the more powerful speaker: the doctor's speech is characterized by (a) explicit announcements of what is going to happen and what the students are to do ('now what I want you to do is to ...'; 'off you go'), and (b) series of questions which, in their directness, put the student on the spot ('did we not look at a baby with a head problem yesterday'), and force the student to 'join in' in an exchange during which he will need to produce utterances that he can, from the very beginning, see to be leading him into a face-losing (or at least, a face threatening) situation for himself.

The data used by both Fairclough and Thomas differ from the data used in the present study in one crucial aspect: in their encounters power is static to a degree in which power in negotiations never is. In business negotiations, roles and relationships change and develop. That is why power in business negotiations is dynamic and creative, allowing and making space for development and for the joint creation of discourse. Yet it is status-and-role bound, in that both parties enter a negotiation event with certain transaction based expectations concerning the relative power invested in each other's roles in that particular business transaction at that particular stage of the business relationship. (On the interplay of role/status and language, see Lampi 1990.)

My data would seem to suggest that there is a particular way of achieving this movement: the imposition of organizational control on the discourse.

Let us turn our attention to organization.

ORGANIZATION AND POWER

Organization[2] in negotiation discourse is here considered to be topic related: Through the discussion of certain issues (Lampi 1989), the negotiators want to get something done, to achieve something. However, there may be a discrepancy between the issues that the two negotiators want to discuss. That is why the ability to initiate topics and get them established as discourse topics and then to develop them for as long as is deemed necessary gives a negotiator the power to create and shape the negotiation interaction. In the following we shall briefly discuss the way this was done in the negotiation data on which the present study is based.

Organizational Framework

In the data, a layered cyclical pattern was identified largely as a result of inspiration from a model proposed by Sinclair (1988), for analyzing written interactive text. The model suggested in the present study for the analysis of negotiation discourse differs in certain significant aspects from Sinclair's model: descriptive detail of the constituents, even the names suggested for the cyclical elements are different, yet its obvious debt to Sinclair (ibid.) must be acknowledged.

In the best discourse analysis tradition, Sinclair's model has three elements: **P** (Posit), **R** (React), and **D** (Determine). These elements are identified through verb tense, attribution, and overall progression of theme in the writing. For the purposes of the present study, these elements were rechristened as **I** (Initiation), **D** (Development), and **E** (End); the three together form a cycle. Furthermore, the individual elements are identified in terms of the kind of contribution they make to 'what is being talked about', i.e., the topic.[3] The cycle is thus given a referential framework: it is topic oriented, and the three constituent elements refer to stages in topic development. For this purpose, topic was defined as a concept or an ideational element in an utterance, about which a proposition or propositions is/are made.

From the point of view of the cyclical organization vis à vis power, two aspects emerge as significant in determining the power relationship currently obtaining between the negotiators: the opportunities open to each individual negotiator to initiate a discussion on a topic that he himself or she herself wants to discuss, and secondly, each negotiator's ability to develop that topic in such a way that the topic is dealt with to the extent that he or she at that point wishes it

to be. Accordingly, each of the cyclical elements will here be looked at separately, with particular focus on the I-element, it being perhaps the most crucial element for gaining dominance.

Defining Topic

In accordance with Brown and Yule (1983), I here take topic, and topic initiation, development and ending, to be discoursal rather than sentence-level phenomena. In other words, a mere topic introduction, performed by one interactant does not suffice to convert a proposition or a noun phrase into a topic. To convert a **potential** topic into a **discoursal** topic, the topic needs to be accepted, i.e., taken up, either explicitly by the other interactant, or implicitly through failure, on behalf of the other interactant, to utilize the Transition Relevance Point for the purpose of turn taking. In other words, as Sperber and Wilson (1986) put it, each utterance contains a pool of potential topics, from which one of them is interactively developed into a topic.

Let us have a closer look at how this happens.

The Power of Topic Initiation

The following extract (1) illustrates the sharing and distribution of power between the main negotiators.

(1)[4] Buyer: OK / well ... we know why we're here today ... **to discuss welding material**

Seller: **right / there are two aspects ... really ... that we would like to ... take up ... one is** ... clearly ... you had the fifty ton trial ... we 'd be interested to get some detailed views from you as to how it's performed right through the process ... and the second aspect of course is ... the commercial aspect ...what it has meant to you in terms of cost ... and what it means to us in terms of potential selling price and cost ... have we got a potential commercial deal between the two companies ... / **maybe we could deal with the** ... the ... technical process route **side first** ... would be the logical place to ...

Buyer: **yes... well...Dennis has handed out some pieces of paper here** ... I mean ... frankly ... we don't need to talk about this

In lines 1 and 2 the Buyer introduced the topic. The utterance is fairly specific and direct on the **organizational** level: It contains conventionalized markers

signalling a topic change (*OK - pause - well)*, i.e., in our terms, a change from one organizational element, cycle, to another. On the **illocutionary** level, however, the utterance is unspecific and indirect; it leaves the Seller considerable freedom to choose the particular aspect he wants to discuss and take up. All it does is impose upon the Seller the task of producing an I-move to break down in any way he likes the main agenda item agreed on beforehand for the negotiation session, the discussion of welding materials. The organizational intent of the Seller's next utterance has thus been specified by the Buyer, who is imposing organizational power on the discourse. On line 3 the Seller corroborates this power and joins in to create coherent discourse. The rest of the organizational structuring is given in bold.

The Power of Topic Development

How can constructive power be wielded through topic development? In any consideration of this question, the default assumption is that the topic being developed contributes to, i.e., is relevant to, the overall aims of at least one of the negotiating parties. In that situation, the negotiator who perceives a topic to further his or her own negotiation aims, can show power through the successful maintenance of the topic. When a negotiator, on the other hand, perceives a topic to further the other party's aims, he or she can show power through successfully changing the topic, and thus finishing the discussion of that particular topic.

In (2) we have an illustration of the successful maintenance of a desirable topic and the simultaneous prevention of topic change. The example is really a part of a series of sequences where the Seller tries to initiate a new topic. His turn starts off in the typical manner of a topic ending element, the summing up of the preceding discussion:

(2) Seller: **so... then it's up to you to make some comparisons...*let me just add one [thing to that***

Buyer: well... well...] *how sensitive ... or otherwise ... is it going to be with volume* ... I mean that ... I'd certainly like you to quote a five ton per week or something up to twenty tons per week

The Buyer quite simply ignores the Seller's efforts to add something, i.e., to change the focus of the conversation. The Seller had used a conventionalized topic opener ("let me just add one thing to that...") which, in the content, functions as an indirect way of saying "Look, I don't want to discuss the current topic any more." Conventionalized indirectness, however, is not a powerful enough strategy

for one in whom power is not at this point vested, to bring about the desired effect. The Buyer produced an 'elicit information', a direct question, (which organizationally constitutes the initiation of a sub-layer in the discourse, the topic of the sub-layer being *volume sensitive of price) and gets the requested information from one of the subordinate negotiators. Direct questions operate on both the* organizational and the illocutionary levels of discourse, and are thus extremely efficient. (Even in ordinary casual conversation, as we well know from our everyday experience, it is very difficult indeed to ignore a direct question.)

About a minute later the Seller makes a second attempt at topic initiation. Again, it occurs at a perfectly expected and organizationally legitimate point, right after a subordinate negotiator summarizes and evaluates the topic he and the Buyer had been developing, thus (indirectly) signalling topic ending. His language, again, signals the desire to begin a new topic, and therefore to finish discussion of the current topic. This desire to finish the discussion is, again signalled indirectly:

(3) Seller 3: well ... well ... we shall improve our yield we shall im- ... even improve the quality to what we've got now so **err .. that ... that is the ... that's where we see ourselves ... and ... that's why ... if we go into that ... five ton or ten ton lots that's ...** not really good for us

Seller 1: *the other interesting [aspect to this* Buyer: so ... so ... ten tons] is not very ...*(Seller clears his throat)*

Seller 3: well ... I mean ... if ... if ... if we don't ... if we ... if we got to have five tons and then ... wait again and ...then have another five tons and so on ... [if we

Buyer: oh no]

He still isn't successful poor Seller. I must give you the end of his efforts as well, mustn't I; the passage (4) where his topic initiation is finally successful:

(4) Seller 3: I mean ... not ... not for any other reason ... I'm talking about it from the manufacturing point of view
Buyer: yes
Seller 3: and the technical point of view
Buyer: OK fair enough

Seller: There's another important aspect **though and ... that is the regularity of it ... mm ... if we're ... to start with the steel situation ... if we can take some regular ... scheduled forwards on British Steel ... based on a schedule ... from** yourselves ... I mean ... our price is slightly better from British Steel than on a stop stock situation and ...
Buyer: yes

This initiation would only seem to be successful because the Buyer the more powerful one explicitly accepted the ending of his topic with his sequence *"OK fair enough - no new initiation"*. He thus recognized the Seller's desire to initiate another topic. This is a recurrent feature in the data: the negotiator with less power has to 'receive permission' from the more powerful negotiator to initiate topics; i.e., he will usually wait for the more powerful one to explicitly end the discussion of a previous topic, or be silent, before he produces an I-move. In doing so, both negotiators are displaying tactical deference. They are, in other words, seemingly deliberately leaving the field open for the other interactant, by using less powerful, "weaker" strategies, for the sake of achieving eventually a possible shift in power, or for the sake of maintaining a balance of power, within their business relationship.

So, in view of the above, where does power in topic development lie? The power of the more powerful one in this case the Buyer is basically status-oriented, but expressed through language. The power that he has means that he can make the Seller talk and make him keep on talking or prevent him from talking, as above. The weaker party's power, in our case the Seller's, on the other hand, is in his ability to choose with great care the language the actual wording that he uses to give information, and the strategies he chooses. (An examination of that process, of course, lies beyond the scope of the present paper.) Only organizationally, as well as "overall agendawise" is the Seller restricted by the Buyer. And therein lies the difference between the organizational power wielding to be observed in business negotiations, where the power distribution is dynamic, and illocutionary level power wielding the kind that Jenny Thomas has examined in asymmetrical situations where the power distribution is static: On the organizational level, the more powerful one leaves his interactant freedom, albeit limited, to contribute to the creation and development of discourse; power wielding on the illocutionary level tends to restrict the interactant's freedom to creatively shape the discourse.

The Power of Ending a Topic

The ultimate ending of the discussion of a topic is, effectively, the initiation of a new topic. Only then can the interlocutors see that one topic has really at least for the time being been abandoned for another. This, in fact, reflects conversational reality: A speaker can produce an utterance containing conventionalized signals to express his intent / desire to end topic development. (This we saw happening in (2) and (3.) He can do this by producing summaries and evaluations of preceding topics. He can also, of course, include actual lexical and discourse markers in his utterance. Nevertheless, unless his interactant shares this desire to finish the topic, and joins in and accepts the ending of that topic, the topic development will not be finished.

Basically, power in topic endings can be displayed in one of the two ways already familiar to us: the ability to produce an utterance that will discontinue an unpalatable sequence, and, on the other hand, the ability to prevent the other negotiator from ending the discussion of the topic should the speaker himself wish to continue.

In my data, the less powerful negotiator (in the current negotiation the Seller) tends to use indirect strategies to indicate his desire to end a topic; there was less explicitly marked orientation towards structuring the discourse. The more powerful negotiator, on the other hand, (in our example negotiation the Buyer) displays an explicitly marked, direct, intent to organize and control the event. The Seller relies on moves whose illocutionary values are 'summarizing,' and 'concluding', marking his intent with e.g., a summarizing 'so', but seldom uses metalanguage to indicate actual organizational intent. An example from his utterances:

(5) Seller: so we have room to manoeuvre there's no question about that ... as ... we always thought we would have

This contrasts with the strategy used by the Buyer in (6):

(6) Buyer: **I'm ... just ... just at this mo ... moment somewhat ... reluctant to ... talk about ... or say even how much we're paying for our seamless hollow** ... but I would just like to reaffirm how ... how much we paid for the welding material that we got from you.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

So, where does all this leave us who are faced with the challenge of teaching non-native speakers to negotiate in English? Negotiating in a foreign language is not something that learners automatically pick up during the process of learning a foreign language. It needs special attention, but the time spent on it is, I feel, amply rewarded.

Operating in Finland as I do, I have had native Finnish speaker managerial level staff on in-company training courses come to me to discuss the problems they experience in English-language negotiations, and they sometimes do it in excellent English. Their complaints are manifold, but mostly seem to concentrate on one particular aspect: the difficulty of interpreting the pragmatic meanings of their negotiation partner's utterances. And vice versa: they seem to feel that their own pragmatic intentions may not be fully appreciated, that their carefully planned negotiation strategy falls flat in its actual implementation; that, in fact, they are powerless in the face of (especially) their native speaker counterpart.

Today I have focused on one of these pragmatic problems: the problem that the non-native speaker faces in simply attempting to initiate discussion of an issue and to avoid discussion of other issues; in other words, the problems he has when he feels he wants to contribute, from an equal platform, to the development of the structure and organization of the ongoing negotiation. The ability to do that is a very important skill indeed. The ability to take and share responsibility for the organization of the discourse means that you are not at the mercy of your interactant as non-native speakers often reportedly feel themselves to be.

What could we do?

Basically, I would suggest first of all that we should make our learners aware of the impact of certain situational parameters the power parameter, in particular in negotiations. We should encourage them to analyze the negotiation situation at hand be it a real one or a case study to be worked on in the English negotiation skills course. They should ask themselves the all-important question: What is my initial power status in this negotiation? Do I see myself as the more powerful one in business terms or does the other party have the upper hand?

If our learner perceives his own party to be the more powerful one for example, if he is the Buyer receiving a new Seller he should be helped to utilize this position through his language, yet to avoid domineering language, i.e., cornering his interactant by totally restricting the illocutionary force of the subsequent utterance; that would only serve to destroy the potential of the business

relationship. He should be taught to make agenda item statements: to initiate new topics using utterances which exhibit constructive control of the overall topic organization; utterances, with which he hands the floor to this interactant, utterances which would thus give him organizational power while leaving his interactant freedom to operate within the organizational limits he has set. By so doing, he would be offering the other negotiating party the chance to also contribute.

However, it is the less powerful party who is likely to perceive himself as having more problems than actually the powerful one. Therefore more attention should be paid to that angle. Quite specifically, I would suggest that the potential and principles of tactical deference should be pointed out to the one who perceives himself or is perceived--initially to have less power. We should point out that by adhering to his initial status-bound role albeit a seemingly less powerful one at times he will at least have a better chance to gain long-term success than through aggressively domineering behavior, which would, of course, render him short-term power. This attention to the requirements of a long-term relationship can be referred to with the term **deferential strategy**. As part of his deferential strategy we could help him to

1. identify the main points of organizational topic structure, i.e., how topics are dealt with in negotiations.
2. identify the cues produced by the more powerful speaker for taking up the offered floor, and helping him to act on those cues.
3. produce utterances which not only take up but also organize discourse so that he is able to share responsibility instead of being a subservient follower.

We should, in other words, encourage the less powerful party the Seller in the initial stages of the business relation, but perhaps the buyer at later stages? To use strategies which are in accordance with his role behavior; yet he should naturally be encouraged to use every opportunity to share responsibility for structuring the discourse in other words, to avoid submissive behavior and, instead, to produce utterances which simultaneously conform with the organizational expectations and show initiative in topic initiation, development or ending.

Can all that be done? I would hope so, and I think it can. Business executives, in particular, in my experience, have very shrewd ideas about the pragmatic power relations obtaining between the negotiating parties much shrewder, I must say than we linguists. We need, however, to know much more about the power pragmatics of negotiations. Here I have only been able to hint at some points. If

familiar and mundane aspects of negotiation discourse are subjected to scrutiny from the perspective of the pragmatics of power, I feel confident that new and exciting discoveries will be made.

There is evidence that business executives keenly feel their status-bound power in negotiations, as well as awareness of the goals that they are aiming at. These should be taken up and discussed, and the language implications pointed out. In doing this, we would, in fact, be relating language to the pragmatic reality of our learners. And surely this a good starting point for actually helping them to learn meaningful language in a meaningful context. What more could we want?

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NOTES

[1] A good illustration in itself is the emergence of the term 'gatekeeper encounters,' based on the idea of static power asymmetricity; also studies of immigrant > < native speaker interaction.

[2] In this paper the term "organization" is used advisedly, as, following Hoey (1991), we make a difference between discourse organization which is a patterned (and here) cyclical phenomenon not necessarily embracing every single textual detail and discourse structure which assumes a hierarchical, comprehensive rank scale type of description. Reference is quite specifically made to organization rather than structure.

[3] A subdivision of topics on the basis of their business relevance and business target orientation would, of course, be illuminating. This, however, falls outside the scope of the present paper.

[4] Note the transcription conventions used throughout the examples: / stands for a pause of c. 1 sec.; ... stands for a clear pause of less than 1 sec.; [ ] signifies overlapping speech. In addition, those parts of the example which are the special focus of analytical attention are highlighted, either in bold, underlined, or in italics.

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